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Opening and Introductions: Education for the many, prison for the few

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Openings and introductions: education for the many, prison for the few

Rod Earle and James Mehigan

They say you shouldn't judge a book by the cover but we are more than happy for this book to be judged that way. The cover art for this book was given to us by an artist in a Scottish prison. He got to hear about the book through the regular outreach work conducted by the Open University's (OU's) Students in Secure Environments (SiSE) team. His work has been acclaimed and displayed by the Koestler Trust, a charity that promotes arts and humanities activities in prisons across the UK. Ruth McFarlane (see Chapter 2) invited 'Ben' to produce an image for the cover of the book. Without much briefing – except that it was about the OU's work in prison – he produced the stunning image on the front cover. We could not have asked for a more life-affirming image. As one of our contributors, Erwin James (see Chapter 14), a former prisoner himself, has said 'in prison you live in your head' (James, 2012, p 3). **[[AU: 2012 as here or 2013 as in the refs?]]** Anyone who has been imprisoned knows the truth of that. Here, in 'Ben's' artwork, that quality of imprisonment is invoked and subverted. The light of learning pours out of a radiant and smiling face. You can judge our book by the way it measures up to this image. It is not all about hope, transcendence and liberation, but the opening of life's potentials that Ben's image evokes has driven the OU's work in prison and propelled the contributors to this book, most of whom have been imprisoned themselves.

Academic publishing houses, such as Policy Press, invite independent academics to critically evaluate the strength and viability of the book proposals they receive. One of the academics reviewing our proposal commented "it reads a bit like a love letter to the OU". We stand guilty as charged. Although the real history of the Open University is one of a tangled and contested mesh of competing narratives, as Dan Weinbren's Chapter 4 shrewdly attests (see also Weinbren, 2014), there is much to be loved and cherished about the OU. However, reaching


its 50th anniversary in 2019 it can look back over a time of neoliberal ascendancy in higher education that has seen its fees quadruple following the withdrawal of tax-generated government subsidies in 2010. As a result student registrations have fallen dramatically. Since 1969, the OU's singular position as the one and only 'university of the air', has been transformed. It is now jostled in a rowdy new marketplace for higher education, distance and online learning, and studying throughout the life course. Our affection for the OU is undoubtedly conditioned by nostalgia for less embattled times, but our love for it comes from a sense of what is sacred about it. As Hannah Arendt (2006 [1961], p 196) argues 'education is the point at which we decide whether we love the world enough to assume responsibility for it'.

Education appeals to what the novelist Doris Lessing (1998: ix) describes sympathetically as 'a deep and terrible need within us all to systematise and make order'. Writing an introduction to a small 'pocket canon' edition of *Ecclesiastes or, The preacher*, Lessing warns of the way 'the living springs of knowledge, of wisdom, become captured by institutions, and by churches of various kinds'. Lessing points to the tangled and obscure origins of the figure that speaks through this 'book' of the Old Testament Bible with such mysterious beauty. How and what do we know of the provenance of this figure who is claimed by many but known by few, asks Lessing: 'this "Preacher" was no churchman, and nowhere does he mention a church'. The figure of the 'Preacher' in *Ecclesiastes* is perhaps a retrospectively imposed term, assigned by 'organized Christianity' rather than the image Lessing prefers to reclaim for the voices she reads in the book: 'Should that "Preacher" have been "Teacher!"? – a very different thing' (Lessing, 1998, p xi).

The Open University is certainly not a church, but it has been driven by teaching and teachers, most of whom have a fierce and profound faith in its foundational principles; open to ideas, to people, to places and to methods, and the need to argue about them. In Chapter 4 Dan Weinbren reports on a student who, after studying with the OU, laments that he 'has been unable to see less than six sides to any question'. The 50th anniversary has involved championing the OU's principles and returning to the question of what a university can do and who it should be for, sometimes with positively Old Testament zeal, as a former Vice Chancellor, Peter Horrocks, discovered when his cavalier approach to the task of re-structuring the OU led to a staff revolt, culminating in his resignation. Nowhere is the OU passion for teaching and learning more obvious or more urgent than in its work

with prisons and prisoners. In this book you will find not only first-hand testimony to the value of that work but also arguments, ideas and, most specifically, love for the Open University.

The first five chapters of the book bring together academic and other OU staff to provide historical, sociological and organisational context for the development of the Open University's work in prisons. The remaining nine chapters are from prisoners and former prisoners who have themselves completed OU studies while on the inside. Interspersed among the 14 chapters are some short reflective pieces, or 'vignettes', by prisoners about studying with the OU while incarcerated. Each one is a personal view of the experiences and challenges of studying while serving a prison sentence. There are nine of these vignettes and we hope they add a further idiosyncratic dimension to the longer chapters comprising the book.

Following this chapter, **Anne Pike** and **Ruth McFarlane**  in Chapter 2 discuss how the work in prison and with prisoners has developed over the last 50 years. It looks at the prison student's journey and the practical issues involved in developing and delivering the OU curriculum in prisons. The digital divide may be threatening to leave behind prison students (and others with access difficulties) but it also has interesting potential. The chapter introduces these exciting digital opportunities. They may be just emerging but they have the potential to enable many more students in prison to transform their lives. The gap between the mainstream and prison student experience may never be completely bridged, but with the right technology and commitment, it may well be significantly reduced.

Chapter 3 offers a singular and focused account of the extraordinary circumstances of prison education in Northern Ireland. Drawing on the OU's oral history archive *Time to Think*, **Philip O'Sullivan** and **Gabi Kent** discuss the development of prison education in the context of the conflict. Prisoners from both sides of the political divide were educated throughout the Troubles, but this policy would not have come about without the impressive work of OU staff and some insightful state functionaries who could see the value of higher education to prisoners, regardless of any political motivation to their offending. The OU's prison education helped prisoners from both sides to develop their intellectual interests while serving sentences for offences committed during their political struggles.

In 2014 **Dan Weinbren** wrote the definitive history of the Open University (Weinbren, 2014). For this volume he has focused on the history of prison education. While O'Sullivan and Kent looked at the

early development of a very specific part of the OU's prison education development, Weinbren takes a broader perspective. He looks at the OU's prison education across the regions and nations to locate the development of the OU's work in prison in historical context. The OU has to be seen as a product of the unique historical moment of its creation. The influence of the Cold War and the need for a social democratic bulwark or counterpoint to communism tied in neatly with the university's modern industrial-scale curriculum development in disseminating enlightened cultural values. While we may romanticise the motivations of the OU's founders, it is important not to forget the times, society and geopolitical reality of which they were a product.

This opening series of chapters is concluded with the fifth, in which **Rod Earle** and **James Mehigan** ask searching questions about the recent convergence between the expanded new university sector and the ever expanding prison complex. The OU's pioneering work has laid a path up which many have travelled and, while we would never decry the achievements of individual students or their teachers, we query the benefit of finding virtue and opportunity in prison expansion. Universities must ask critical questions of prisons and the work they do. The measure of success, argue Earle and Mehigan, would be prison shrinkage and the warning signs of failure, growth.

The remaining chapter of the book is written entirely by people who have been imprisoned and studied with the Open University. In the first prisoner-authored chapter **Kris McPherson** takes us through the literature on desistance and rehabilitation from the perspective of a serving prisoner. There is a lot of research on desistance and it is a thriving specialism, but McPherson's contribution here is unique in that it connects a deep understanding of that literature with a thoughtfully reflexive application of that theory to his own relationship with the criminal justice system generally and the road to release more specifically.

The desistance pathway as a journey of introspection and realisation is also present in the chapter by **Margaret Gough**. Receiving a 15 year sentence was a low point in her life, but she threw herself into education, passing exams and building the confidence to apply to the OU. She had, all her life, thought that degrees were for 'clever people', but took a chance on a free introductory course. Her road to first class honours is a clear illustration of many of the challenges described by Pike and McFarlane (Chapter 2) including the difficulty of accessing the internet and communicating with tutors. The hopefulness provided by studying and academic success is also tempered by the prejudicial

attitude to prisoners upon release, a theme sadly returned to by many of the contributors to this volume.

Working in the OU's Students in Secure Environment's team, **Stephen Akpabio-Klementowski** supports prison education as someone with deep experience of it. Having graduated from the OU while in prison, he then undertook a Master's degree, also while in prison, and went on to commence his PhD at the OU. These studies, on rehabilitation and prison education through the prison gate, are conducted part-time alongside his full-time work supporting prison students. For Akpabio-Klementowski the education of prisoners is almost all consuming in deeply personal, as well as professional and academic ways. In his chapter he discusses the changes he experienced in himself in the course of his sentence and their relationship with his OU studies. The frank contrast of his pre-prison life and his life today is a testament to the impact the OU can have in the prison environment.

Starting out at the OU is not always easy for any student and it was not until **Michael Irwin** transferred from a prison in England to one in Northern Ireland that he was able to get over the 'false starts' he had been experiencing in his studies. Irwin is clear that his OU studies helped him survive in prison and grow in confidence. In this chapter he describes that road and the influence of many of the academics whose work helped him along the way. Having found a fascination for convict criminology while doing his OU degree in prison, he published his memoir *My life began at forty* upon his release (Irwin, 2017).

Unlike Irwin who began his sentence at 40, **Abdulhaq Al-Wazeer** received a lengthy sentence as a young adult. Like many of the contributors to the volume, he had negative experiences of formal education and a lack of confidence in engaging in university-level studies. His journey to an OU degree is not one of a planned, targeted, steady graft, but almost of an accidental progression through his prison educational opportunities. It led him to 'develop an acute, yet quite accidental interest in politics'. His story of personal development and study during his time inside finishes with a plea for the role of education in the rehabilitation of prisoners to be taken more seriously.


Since **Edwin Screeche-Powell** was released he has gone on to commit to forging an academic career. A PhD candidate at the University of Kent, he completed his OU BA while in prison. Screeche-Powell's chapter begins with the judge's sentencing remarks (the same moment Gough, in Chapter 7, described as the lowest point in her life). He then takes the reader through his story by looking

at his sentence in three stages, as they relate to his OU studies. This unique take begins by looking at his life inside before his studies, a period he describes as ‘ante/anti-’ the OU, when he was resistant to the idea of studying. He then looks at his studies and postgraduate life. He concludes by telling the reader of his great regret that his father is not around to see the progress he has made.

Far from Screeche-Powell’s life in the south-east of England and separated by years as well as distance, **Laurence McKeown** lived out one of the more unusual lives of an OU student. Having been convicted for offences related to the Troubles in Northern Ireland, he was imprisoned in the H-Blocks in the Maze Long Kesh Prison. The story of students in prison as a result of the conflict in Northern Ireland is an unusual one, and some historical context is discussed by O’Sullivan and Kent (Chapter 3). McKeown brings out his distinctive personal and political experience of study and discusses how his OU education shaped him, his time in prison and his perspective on political struggles in Ireland. His experience is from the Nationalist side of the conflict, but many prisoners from the Loyalist side were also able to benefit from OU study while serving their sentences. Although we were unable to include their voices in this collection, we hope further publications of this kind will afford them this opportunity. O’Sullivan and Kent’s chapter offers some insights into the experience of prisoners from both sides, and they are also extensively explored in the OU’s oral history archive Time to Think. The archive has an online presence where sections of interviews with prisoners, tutors and others involved in prison education at the time can be explored online (see [Appendix 2](#)). **[[AU: there is no appendix 2 currently]]**

The penultimate chapter is by another convict criminologist, **Dave Honeywell** who has been studying desistance as part of his PhD at the University of York. Honeywell’s experience with the OU was relatively brief. He completed a foundation course while a prisoner and this gave him the capacity to enter undergraduate studies at a traditional university upon his release. Even this small contact demonstrates one end of the spectrum of means by which prisoners have used the OU to help them advance their lives. In this chapter he draws upon his research to bring a different perspective on the desistance literature. Through a series of qualitative interviews with prisoners and former prisoners, Honeywell looks at the quality of ‘liminality’, a sense of ambiguity that anthropologists describe in rites of passage. The motivation for the research was to find out if his own sense of stigma and liminality were widespread. It is clear from the chapter that they are. This liminality may pose many challenges to

those on the desistance pathway, and education can help with this, but the conflict between past and present will remain for many prisoners.

Perhaps the highest profile contributor is **Erwin James**, a former prisoner who had a column in the *Guardian* while still serving his sentence. James' contribution is in one sense a classic 'redemption script' one could imagine reading about in the desistance literature discussed by other contributors such as McPherson and Honeywell. Yet it is also a deeply personal account of what the OU has given to the author, with tangible examples of where further education could, and did help him progress from prisoner to writer.  provides the perfect way to round out the chapters and bring together the sense of what the OU contribution can be for a prisoner with the hunger to learn.

Throughout the book there are references to module names and codes. While most universities have their own acronyms and phrases to help navigate their organisational structures and academic practices, it often seems that the OU has taken to this parallel language with a phenomenal enthusiasm. To some degree this is inevitable as traditionally closed practices were opened up and produced at scale, although sometimes it can seem a bit unnecessary ('modules' were called 'courses' until recently and webpages still contain the word 'course' as it is better for internet search engines). We have tried to edit in a way that respects the student's experience of their own studies, remembering that for years the student will have known the module by its number more than its name.

While the technology and course or module titles have changed over the years, the basic principles of OU teaching have remained reasonably consistent. Central academics and a wider team of advisers and external contributors design the teaching and learning materials for a module. Once they have been produced, in all their diverse and changing forms of media, they are presented to students by associate lecturers (also known as tutors) who support regionally based tutor groups. Students in secure environments, such as prisons, cannot participate in these groups and are allocated a dedicated tutor to support their learning. There are some references to 'tutor-counsellors' from among the contributors to this volume and this reflects an earlier role, which involved both tutoring and some pastoral advisory support. We have avoided altering these descriptions as they reflect the linguistic experience of the student at the time of their studies and it did not feel appropriate to 'update' or homogenise the terms across the book.

Tutors allocated to support a student in prison will have different levels of access to their students, depending on the distance of the tutor

from the prison, the teaching requirements of the module or course, and other aspects of the learning design developed by the team. Each prison's capacity and willingness to facilitate such access is a further factor influencing the student's learning journey. Many students have benefited from face-to-face tutorials, but others have had to make do with telephone tutorials and others have had no verbal contact with their tutors at all. This has meant that different prisoners have had different experiences of different modules throughout their studies as well as compared to similar students in other prisons. Providing a consistent experience is difficult for all forms of distance education, but it is even more complicated for prison students, given their unusual status as both student and prisoner, living for the future and suffering for their past.

In this collection not every contributor wants to disclose their offending history or the offence(s) which led them to serve the sentences where they studied with the OU. For some students their offence may be central to the account they want to present in their chapter or vignette while for others, putting it (or them) behind them may be more important to their narrative. This might occasionally leave some readers feeling like they are missing a bit of context, or some important detail about the author but, as editors, we respect their decision about how much to discuss their 'index offence'. Having tutored and mentored prison students for many years we feel that higher education in prison is about the student's future and not necessarily all that much to do with their past. In many ways this perspective fits with the OU's mission, to provide educational opportunity to anyone who is willing to commit to it, regardless of their background, race, gender, status or previous educational experience. We are happy to carry that lack of prejudice into the field of prison education and we trust that most readers can as well.

Indeed, resisting a rush to judgment based on an offence category is, in many ways, essential for prison education to be a success. Not all tutors are so comfortable with this approach and even some of those who elect to support students in prison struggle with their relationship with students because of their past criminal history. However, this is unusual and unsurprising. Tutoring prison students at the OU is an 'opt-in' experience for which tutors are not paid very much. Tutors come at it with an open mind, a commitment to open access to education and a professionalism which is widely admired by prison staff and students alike. Throughout this book there is reference to the excellent work of tutors and we would like to acknowledge it here. It is for this reason that we have dedicated this book to those tutors

who have gone into prisons, or taught prison students by other means over the last 50 years.

It is also very important to acknowledge the work done by prison staff in facilitating the prison student experience. Not every case has been perfect and not every prison has embraced the challenges of distance learning equally, but the last 50 years have provided many examples of prison staff going the extra mile for OU students. In assembling this book it was important for us to focus on the stories of the prisoners themselves rather than the prison staff. Their accounts of the OU are important, but, to echo the current vernacular in higher education, for us it was a case of ‘students first’. The stories of education and other prison staff’s role in enabling the OU to accomplish its mission in prisons are crucial and waiting to be heard but they are for another book, another story for another day.

To bring this chapter back to where it began, with the front cover and the visual impact of a book, we are as concerned about the future of higher education as we are about the state of prisons. The image on our cover, so beautifully painted by the artist and gifted to us, is of the radiant potential of education and its capacities to extend the mind, to free the soul of the prisoner. Universities do not routinely invoke such ambitious images even in their most expensive marketing strategies for fear of seeming ridiculously, implausibly and abstractly idealistic. And prisons certainly don’t. The Open University, 50 years on from its establishment, can still, we believe, work with such an image and such an idea because that is how it started, and how we hope it will go on.

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